

Masthead Logo

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# Brotsuppe

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MELANIE DRANE

*Brotsuppe*

We agree I'll pay by the week for meals  
and one room behind the kitchen.  
Every morning, Herr Neugebauer stirs  
*Brotsuppe* on the electric coil, porridge  
from stale bread rinds, lumps softened  
to paste in scalded milk—the same breakfast  
he's eaten since his childhood between world  
wars. He says bread is holy, a blessed  
feast, and then he hums, trimming back  
the blue roses that grow wild in the loaf.

In September, he waits for the old plum tree  
in the garden to rain small, hard blue fruit,  
*Zwetschke* that cling to their stones. All night  
I listen to plums dropping on the tin roof  
of the tool shed. By morning, wasps hover  
over the lawn, swarm above geranium  
pots, until the plums burst their swollen  
skins in the grass, sticky red syrup glistening  
where they've been broken. Herr Neugebauer's  
still humming, won't give up

a single piece, takes a rusted paring knife,  
sits on a stool by his blue aluminum pail,  
cutting away the bad parts. On Sundays,  
he adds boiled plums to my *Brotsuppe*.  
For lunch, there's compote, more brown  
and wrinkled plums; at dinner, he slices  
*Pflaumkuchen*, tells me the value of saving  
whatever you can: "Just eat a bruised  
banana with your eyes closed, it's delicious."  
He sucks his false teeth, hums.  
Plum season has ended, it's cold now.  
Mornings when the radiator begins to hiss

and thump in my bedroom, I hear him humming  
through the kitchen wall. Today I'm up early,  
there's sun over the garden; from my window,  
frost on the bare branches of the plum tree.  
Today Herr Neugebauer's breaking  
into words, so happy, he's singing something  
about bread, singing it again louder  
when I enter the kitchen—I'm still learning

German, have to concentrate  
to understand. Herr Neugebauer's startled  
to see me—he's in his bathrobe,  
dark longjohns on his skinny legs,  
his lips almost blue, *Brotsuppe*  
scorching on the coil. Our eyes  
meet, as he breaks the law and sings  
the Horst-Wessel-Lied out loud:  
*Millions look to the swastika full of hope,  
The day breaks for freedom and for bread.*

The scent of weedy, long-stewed coffee  
rises like smoke. Herr Neugebauer lights  
a cigarette, turns to say: "Songs never hurt  
anyone, you understand? We just wanted to sing  
again, even now I only want to sing again.  
You won't move because of music, will you?"  
I'm silent at the table, head down, chewing  
bread rinds I can't swallow. The tablecloth's  
dusted with a fine snowfall of crumbs,  
outside, blue jays wheeze in the plum tree.